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ABSTRACT

As a means of exploring public attitudes toward political institutions, the research analyzes theories explaining public trust and confidence in the president and the congress. Hypotheses examined include that there exists a connection between discontent with authorities and institutions, that certain groups in society (the young and socioeconomically disadvantaged, for example) do not share values reflected by government, and that the current lack of confidence in government merely expresses a low of popular support for present incumbents. Theories were evaluated in light of survey data collected from the University of Michigan's Center for Political Studies 1978 National Election Study. Included among findings are that discontent with actions and policies pursued by a series of leaders may eventually undermine respect for the political system, that the public feels that their representatives may be responsive but congress is not, and that there is a strong association between political distrust and support for severe tax cutting legislation. The conclusion is that there exists a predisposition among American citizens to accept massive changes in the structure of government. It is suggested that these changes may in the long run prove more detrimental than the immediate negative attitudes toward political institutions. (DB)

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The Institutional Focus of Political Distrust

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Abstract

The Institutional Focus of Political Distrust

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Survey data from the Center for Political Studies 1978 National Election Study are used to test various theories explaining distrust of political institutions. The explanations examined include an accumulation of discontent with authorities, social and political disadvantage, the unpopularity of specific incumbents, dissatisfaction with the government's handling of economic problems and anti-institutional criticism of Congress by House members. The analysis suggests that public regard for Congress is unaffected by evaluations of incumbent performance because members are judged on the basis of service to the district while Congress is assessed in terms of policy decisions. Confidence in the president is, however, influenced by the performance and appeal of specific incumbents Nevertheless the most important explanation is accumulating discontent with authorities which has become targeted at the institutions. The behavioral consequences of growing political distrust are also briefly indicated.

The Institutional Focus of Political Distrust*

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The replacement of unpopular incumbents through regularly scheduled elections is a particularly visible process which theoretically acts to sustain respect for political authorities. By contrast, representative democracies fail to provide a direct means of maintaining public regard for their political institutions. Institutional reform is both long-term, relative to change in authorities, and rarely involves citizens directly. Thus, it is often not salient to the public and may not even affect how citizens evaluate political institutions. In addition, by the very nature of their size and multiple membership, institutions are more abstract political objects than are incumbents. When confidence in institutions declines, it is therefore difficult to assess the political meaning of the discontent and to prescribe changes aimed at restoring positive evaluations.

The general purpose of this paper is to explore empirically theories which explain public attitudes toward political institutions. More specifically, the analysis and discussion concern two particularly salient political institutions, the president and congress. Public trust or confidence in these institutions forms the conceptual focus of the attitudes examined. The evidence employed to test the hypothesized explanations of trust in the president and congress derive mainly from the Center for Political Studies 1978 national election survey.[1]

Several different theories have been offered as explanations of public support for political institutions. One prominent theory postulates a connection between discontent with authorities and institutions. According to this view, the discontent generated by a series of distrusted authorities may accumulate and eventually become directed at the very institutions of government (Easton, 1965, 1975; Gamson, 1968). A second set of hypotheses suggest that certain individuals in society, for example, the young or the socio-economically disadvantaged, do not share the values reflected by the government (Keniston, 1965; Meier and Bell, 1959); and because they are systematically excluded from having a voice in the political process, their confidence in political institutions wanes. Yet another theory argues that the current lack of confidence in government merely expresses a low level of popular support for the present incumbents rather than representing a more profound discontent with authorities in general or institutions per se (Citrin, 1974; Muller and Jukam, 1977). A fourth, but closely related counter argument, goes beyond incumbent popularity and points to evaluations of the government's performance in various policy areas. Presumably, an important factor creating distrust is the inability of government to meet citizen expectations in dealing with critical social problems such as inflation or energy shortages (Miller, 1974; Miller, Goldenberg and Erbring, 1979). A fifth and frequently cited explanation centers on the negative image supposedly attributed to political institutions either by the media (Robinson, 1976) or by politicians who are critical of the very organizations they staff (Fenno, 1978). Each of these theories will be examined in turn and

the various explanations combined into a multivariate model which presents a more cogent explanation of public attitudes toward political institutions.

GENERALIZED DISTRUST OF POLITICAL AUTHORITIES

The attitude of political trust can be directed at different objects. Individuals may, for example, express a high level of confidence in political institutions but feel alienated from the particular incumbents who staff them. Easton (1965) has suggested that trust is a differentiated attitude directed at three general political foci--the authorities, the regime and the political community. These three political objects have increasing inclusiveness. The political community, or group of people bound together by a common political enterprise, is more inclusive than the regime which incorporates the political institutions and the general principles or norms specifying the formal and informal rules by which the institutions function. The final and least inclusive object is the present set of incumbents who fill the offices designated by the authority roles.

Theories of democracy suggest that periodic elections act as a mechanism which keeps levels of discontent with the political community and the regime low. Elections tend to direct citizen dissatisfaction toward the authorities and provide a means of "throwing the rascals out." However, if the process of elections does not succeed in producing popular incumbents, the discontent generated by a series of distrusted authorities may accumulate and eventually be directed at the institutions of government. According to Gamson, when several undesirable political outcomes occur over an extended series of incumbents, citizens may conclude that

not only are the authorities biased against them but "the institutions themselves may be the source of bias" (1968, p. 51).

Previous studies (Miller, 1974) suggest that in recent years dissatisfaction has been accumulating over a series of leaders, each of whom had announced that they would solve various social problems afflicting the nation (e.g., racial discrimination, the Vietnam war, high inflation, and energy shortages), but none of whom was successful. As the problems persisted, although the leaders changed, people eventually began to question both the effectiveness of elections as a means for producing change and the ability of politicians to perform according to the expectations citizens have of them. This accumulation of dissatisfaction with a series of incumbents could possibly erode political trust and perhaps eventually undermine the respect citizens have for the political institutions themselves.

The attitude of trust in government generally has been monitored over the past two decades with a series of questions asked in the Survey Research Center/Center for Political Studies biennial national surveys. The concept of political trust has been measured in all these surveys using five separate but intercorrelated items which ask how often the government in Washington can be trusted, whether it is run in an efficient, honest, competent fashion, and whether it produces outputs that benefit all the people or just a few special interests. Despite a continuing controversy over the political significance of these questions, a point we return to later, the trust items have previously been interpreted as measuring a generalized discontent with the performance of authorities (Miller, Goldenberg and Erbring, 1979).

The long term trend in responses to the trust questions, displayed in Figure 1, is of particular importance here for we are concerned with the possibility that discontent with authorities may have persisted long enough to affect institutional confidence. By now the downward trend in political trust, which began in the mid-sixties (see Figure 1),

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Figure 1 goes here

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will come as no surprise to most readers. Perhaps somewhat unexpected, however, is the further decline in trust after Carter's election in 1976. Given that Carter was widely perceived as an open and honest individual, and that he ran on a platform which promised to restore the citizen's confidence in government, the 1978 data may have been expected to reflect an upsurge in political trust rather than to reveal the lowest level of confidence in government during the past twenty years. Only belief in the honesty of political leaders showed any improvement for the population as a whole, and even that attitude was still more negative than it had been in 1972. All other questions indicate a level of cynicism among the public in 1978 at least equal to that immediately following the scandal-filled Watergate period in 1974. A long term trend of growing distrust toward authorities thus exists and may potentially influence evaluations of political institutions.

Unfortunately no comparable time series data measuring public trust in the president and congress are available.[2] Nevertheless, the limited evidence which is usable suggests that confidence in these institutions has also declined in recent years. In the 1972 and 1976 CPS national election surveys respondents were asked "which part of government do you most often trust to do what is right?" The four institutions offered as

Figure 1

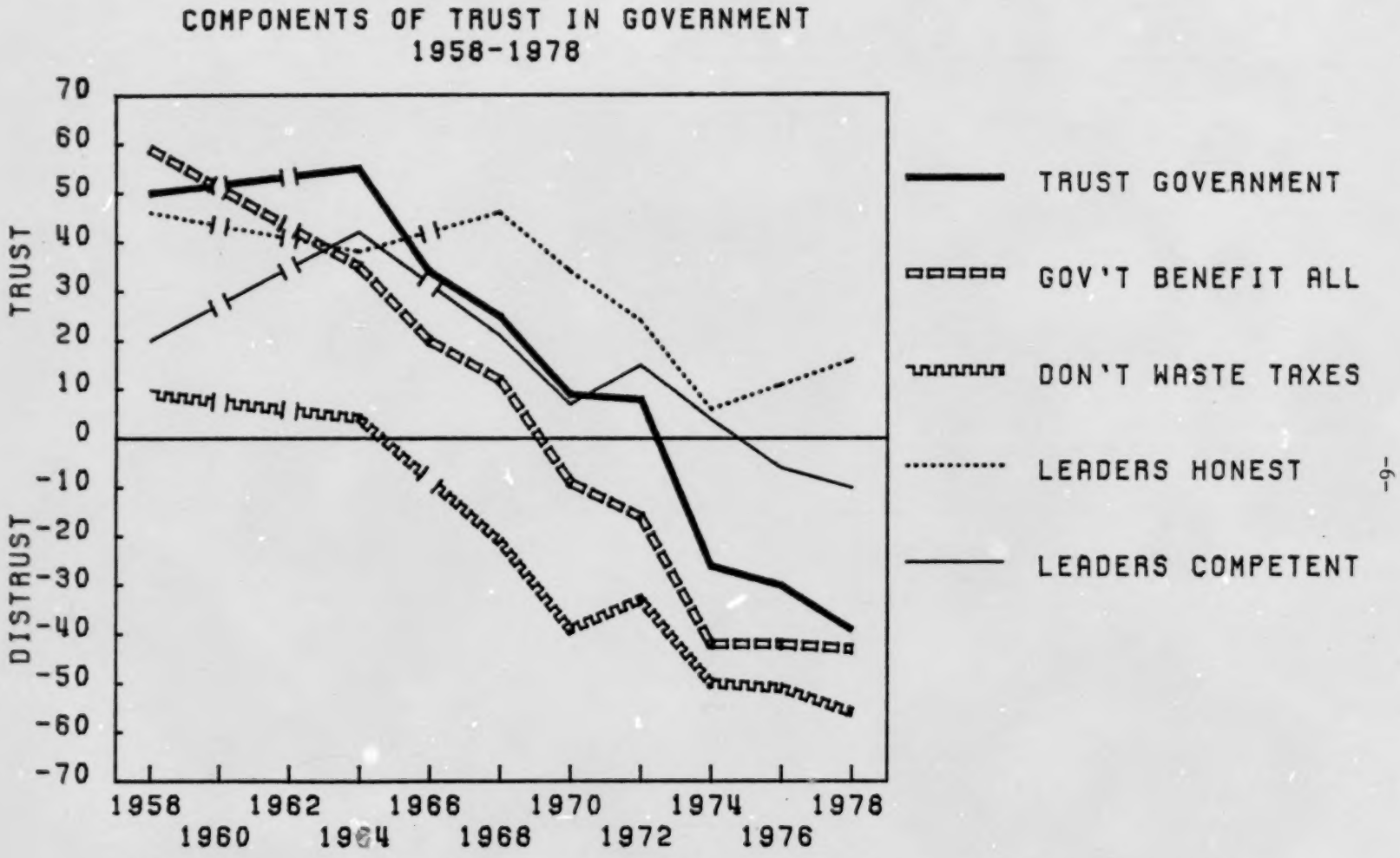

Chart entries are percentage difference index (PDI) values. The proportion of respondents giving a cynical answer to each question was subtracted from the proportion responding in a trusting fashion. Values can range from +100 to -100, with positive numbers indicating a preponderance of trust and negative numbers indicating a preponderance of distrust.

response categories to this question were the president, congress, supreme court and political parties. The rate at which each of these institutions was selected as most trustworthy was 41, 32, 26 and 1 percent, respectively, in 1972 and 30, 28, 40 and 2 percent in 1976. Over the four year period trust in the president had dropped by eleven percentage points, while public confidence in congress slipped four percentage points. During the same period generalized trust in authorities, measured with an index combining the five trust in government items, fell even more drastically (seventeen percentage points). Given that trust in authorities and institutions were correlated in 1972 and in 1976, there is a possibility that change in institutional trust may have resulted from a generalized discontent with authorities.[3]

While it appears that there was a corresponding downward shift of confidence in authorities and institutions during the very recent past, it is difficult to compare the relative levels of public support for the different political objects in the earlier studies because the questions were not similarly worded. However, the 1978 survey introduced a set of four questions which use the same format and wording as two of the general trust in government items, but which ask about confidence in the president and congress. More specifically one pair of the new items asks respondents how much of the time they can trust President Carter or "the U.S. Congress" to do what is right. The second set asks whether the Carter administration (or the U.S. Congress) is "run by a few big interests looking out for themselves" or if it is "run for the benefit of all the people."

Given the question wording, it is difficult to determine if people responded to these new items in terms of institutions per se or on the basis of how they evaluate the specific incumbents who man the institutions. This is particularly true of the questions probing attitudes toward the president. One of these items concentrates specifically on President Carter, while the second appears, at least on the surface, to have more of an institutional focus by asking about the Carter administration. The president is such a visible leader that the office and the incumbent frequently merge in the public's mind. If the public does indeed blur the distinction between these two aspects of the presidency, it may be unrealistic to attempt an artificial separation through analysis. The approach used here is to combine the two questions into a single index because they are moderately correlated ($r = .43$), and then allow the subsequent empirical analysis to demonstrate whether trust in the president simply reflects support for Carter or a more profound set of institutional evaluations.

Similar questions of interpretation also arise with the items about congress despite their apparent institutional focus. Although it is reasonable to assume that most people think of congress as an institution rather than as a specific set of 535 members, it is conceivable that some survey respondents may have thought about particular incumbents as they answered the questionnaire items. Nevertheless, since responses to these two questions were also positively correlated ($r = .42$), the items were again combined into an index similar to that constructed to measure trust in the president.[4]

Given that we cannot a priori define the exact level of the political system represented by the new trust measures, we will proceed to take them at face value as indicators of trust in the president and congress. We expect, however, that subsequent analysis will allow us to conclude to what extent these targets tap evaluations of the authorities rather than of the regime.

The relative degree of trust in the authorities, president and congress in 1978 is similar to the ranking observed earlier from the 1972 and 1976 data (see Figure 2). The president enjoyed a higher degree of trust than

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Figure 2 goes here

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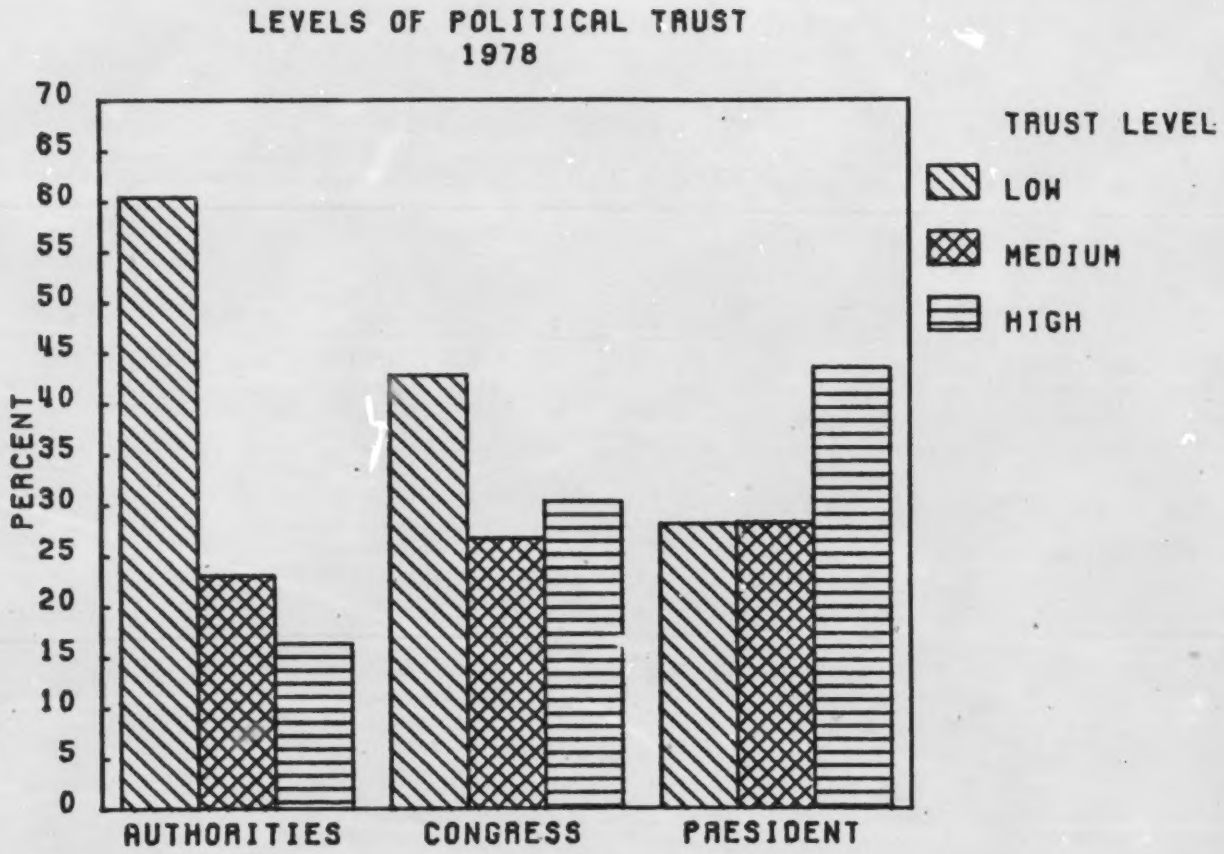
did congress (43 and 30 percent most trusting, respectively), and both of these institutions were more trusted than political authorities in general (only 16 percent most trusting, as measured by the two-item general confidence in government index).

Although the institutions appeared more trustworthy in the eyes of the public than did authorities in general, distrust of authorities was moderately correlated with evaluations of the institutions (.49 and .62 for presidential and congressional trust respectively). Clearly, citizens who were distrusting of authorities were also more likely than others to lack confidence in the president and congress. While these correlations alone are no indicator of causality, they suggest that the long term, accumulated distrust of authorities may have spilled over to influence attitudes toward political institutions. The slightly higher correlation between congressional trust and confidence in authorities appears contrary to the interpretation of the new measures as primarily representing attitudes

Figure 2


LEVELS OF POLITICAL TRUST
1978
PERCENT
70
65
60
55
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
AUTHORITIES
CONGRESS
PRESIDENT
TRUST LEVEL
LOW
MEDIUM
HIGH

toward the present incumbents. Of course these correlations also suggest that some factor may have systematically reduced the impact of generalized political distrust on confidence in the president, a topic addressed by the subsequent analysis.

In summary, political evaluations may be directed at different levels of the political system--the authorities, regime and community. While various political objects may be evaluated independently, public discontent with those at one level of the political system may spill over to influence evaluations at another level. During the past decade and a half discontent with a series of political leaders has been accumulating. Current levels of confidence in institutions may, therefore, reflect a generalized malaise with political authorities.

On the other hand the relationship between confidence in authorities and institutions may simply be a reflection of similar factors that cause both sets of evaluations. A common source of causation might call into question the notion of a spill-over effect, as well as the distinction which treats the president and congress at the regime rather than at the authorities level. Further analysis, to which we now turn, is clearly required to gain an understanding of the specific causes of institutional evaluations and to determine if these attitudes represent anything other than accumulated distrust of authorities.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SOURCES OF DISTRUST

An alternative set of hypotheses explain institutional evaluations in terms of social or political group differences rather than as the result of a generalized political malaise. These hypotheses suggest that certain

groups in society are more distrusting of political institutions than are others. The different levels of support are presumably the result of a discrepancy between the values of the citizen and those the government is perceived to represent.

Economically disadvantaged individuals, for example, may feel that they are deprived of the economic security and material resources enjoyed by others, and they may hold the prevailing institutions responsible for their deprivation (Meier and Bell, 1959; Gurr, 1970). Other groups, such as blacks, may feel that they have been systematically excluded from having a voice or influence in government, thereby expressing a greater degree of distrust (Abramson, 1977). Similarly, studies have suggested that the young in American society are the most alienated because they hold different beliefs and values than those expressed by the older people who control social and political institutions (Keniston, 1965). Yet other studies suggest that the better educated are more distrusting of authorities and institutions both because they have higher standards and are more likely to be informed of corruption in government (Litt, 1963). More recently, partisan orientation has been used to define groups which are more or less supportive of the political system. Citrin (1974; 1975) has suggested that trust in political authorities and institutions depends on which political party controls the government. Partisans who identify with the incumbent party presumably share the political values of those in power and should therefore be more supportive of government.

According to these hypotheses certain differences can be expected in the level of institutional trust for various social and political groups. While the data arrayed in Table 1 below do not directly address the

assumption of a discrepancy between the values of the citizen and those represented by government, they do test for the predicted group differences.

Table 1 goes here

Only a cursory examination of Table 1 is required to realize that the data do not fit the hypotheses. Lower income respondents, for example, were not more distrusting than those who enjoyed higher incomes. The young were not more alienated, rather they were slightly more trusting than older respondents. No significant differences between grade school and college educated individuals were apparent either. The levels of trust by age and education, therefore, neither support the hypotheses nor a model which argues that the young and the better educated may be more strongly socialized into norms of political support (Easton and Dennis, 1967).

Although the relationship between race and political trust is slightly stronger than that found for the other demographic strata, it is opposite to what was expected. Numerous studies have suggested that blacks are more distrusting of the political system than are whites. Nevertheless, the 1978 data reveal a slightly higher level of confidence in authorities and institutions among blacks. This difference reflects a 14 percentage point increase in trust of authorities (the only object for which across time data are available) among blacks between 1976 and 1978, a period during which white attitudes continued to become more negative (dropping by 5 percentage points).

A partial explanation for the shifting racial differences in trust can be found in party identification. The data of Table 1 reveal a

Table 1: Distrust in Political Authorities and Institutions for Demographic and Political Groups

	TARGET OF DISTRUST		
	AUTHORITIES	PRESIDENT	CONGRESS
Income			
$0-9,999	53.5[a]	28.4	41.7
10,000-14,999	63.6	25.7	44.1
15,000-24,999	57.9	25.4	36.8
25,000 +	58.0	29.1	39.7
Age			
18-29	57.3	26.0	40.7
30-54	54.6	28.0	42.6
55-69	65.4	31.0	44.9
70 +	63.4	29.5	43.9
Education			
Grade School	58.7	30.3	46.3
High School	62.3	29.2	40.5
College	58.2	25.9	44.9
Race			
White	61.4	29.3	43.3
Black	54.4	19.9	38.0
Party Identification			
Democrats	54.8	18.6	36.9
Independents	64.6	30.6	47.4
Republicans	62.7	42.6	44.7
Total Sample	60.4	28.2	42.8

[a]Table entries are percent distrusting, that is, giving a cynical response to both items combined to form the particular trust measure.

higher level of trust for Democrats than for Republicans, especially when the president is the target of the distrust. These data, as well as shifts in the level of trust among partisan groups between 1976 and 1978, reveal the impact of party loyalty on political trust. During that period trust in authorities increased by 8 percentage points among Democrats while Republicans showed a 15 percentage drop; trust also decreased among Independents by 4 percentage points. Given that blacks tend to be heavily Democratic, change in their level of trust in authorities between 1976 and 1978 partly reflects the fact that Democrats recaptured the White House in the 1976 election.

In brief, the data of Table 1 do not reveal any enduring group differences in political trust. Levels of confidence in authorities and institutions were quite similar across the various demographic groups. Party identification was related with confidence, especially with trust in the president. This is a particularly important finding because the legitimacy of the political system is potentially threatened only to the extent that public discontent is not channeled through partisan politics. Whether the relationship between party identification and trust implies anything other than blind partisan support or opposition to the incumbents remains unclear at this point. Nevertheless, the data suggest that party identification should be considered an important factor in the remaining analysis.

INCUMBENT SUPPORT

From the discussion thus far it should be apparent that assessing public support of the current incumbents is quite important to understanding the political relevance of institutional trust. One theory argues that

distrust results from out-of-power disgruntlement with the values, partisan orientation, and personal characteristics of the political incumbents (Citrin, 1974; Muller and Jukam, 1977). As such, distrust hardly threatens the stability of a political system that depends on periodic elections, unless it so limits the functioning of each successive incumbent as to undermine the institution itself. Advocates of the "incumbent support theory" have not implied such an over time effect; instead they view this source of political alienation as temporary, "ritualistic," and unimportant to the viability and stability of our political system.

This theory explains the observed long term decline in trust as the result of incumbents who were unpopular and perceived as untrustworthy. Empirical work aimed at testing the theory has, however, been conceptually limited by employing very general measures of "affect" to gauge support of the incumbents (see especially Muller and Jukam, 1977). Such measures ignore the possibility that cognitively citizens employ different substantive concerns when evaluating political leaders. General positive to negative ratings of incumbents could reflect assessments of various attributes including their competence, leadership abilities, trustworthiness, policy proposals, or their unique personality characteristics (Miller and Miller, 1976, pp. 834-35). Negative assessments which arise from evaluations of the personality or personal style of the incumbent are of less concern than those which are based on judgments about performance. Dissatisfaction with how the incumbents are performing in office can become generalized across a series of incumbents, thus possibly raising questions about the office rather than the individuals who fill the

position. However, the personal attributes of leaders, such as their leadership style, personal integrity, background characteristics and mannerisms, vary from incumbent to incumbent and thus influence popular support only in the short run.

Given the possibility that support for the incumbents may represent various cognitive dimensions, its impact on political trust was examined using both a general measure of affective support and ratings of job performance.[5] Affective ratings of Jimmy Carter and the incumbent U.S. representative from the respondent's district were quite similar--75 and 71 percent positive, respectively (see Table 2). In contrast, respondents

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Table 2 goes here

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were far more favorable toward the job performance of House members than the President. Only 37 percent rated Carter's performance "good" as compared with 65 percent for representatives. Apparently affective support for Carter represented more than just evaluations of how competently he was meeting the responsibilities of the president.

Most importantly, Table 2 demonstrates that there was considerable difference between the impact of incumbent support on presidential and congressional trust. Both affective ratings and job performance evaluations of Carter were moderately related with trust in the president. Moreover, partial correlations show that both the affect and performance measures had an independent influence on confidence in the president after the other was controlled. That is, respondents who felt Carter was performing poorly were less likely to trust the president even though they expressed relatively positive feelings towards him as an individual (partial correlation of .21).

Table 2: Institutional Trust by Support for Incumbent Authorities

P R E S I D E N T

Trust in President	Affect Toward Carter: Positive (75%)	Neutral (9%)	Negative (16%)	Evaluation of Carter Performance: Good (37%)	Fair (48%)	Poor (15%)
High	54%	20%	9%	70%	35%	10%
Medium	30	28	22	24	32	22
Low	16	52	69	6	33	68
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
(N)	(1391)	(165)	(289)	(676)	(883)	(276)
	Tau_b correlation = .40			Tau_b correlation = .43		

C O N G R E S S

Trust in Congress	Affect Toward Incumbent: Positive (71%)	Neutral (18%)	Negative (11%)	Evaluation of Incumbent Performance: Good (65%)	Fair (30%)	Poor (5%)
High	33%	25%	22%	35%	25%	16%
Medium	28	26	22	29	30	15
Low	38	48	56	36	45	69
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
(N)	(1096)	(283)	(162)	(924)	(430)	(72)
	Tau_b correlation = .11			Tau_b correlation = .13		

Similarly, negative affective ratings of Carter were associated with lower confidence in the president regardless of how well Carter was perceived as functioning in the office (partial correlation of .27).

Degree of support or opposition to incumbent House members, on the contrary, was only weakly associated with trust in congress. Furthermore, affective ratings of the incumbent were not at all related with congressional trust after removing the influence of attitudes toward the member's job performance (partial correlation of .03). These results clearly demonstrate the absence of a link between support for House incumbents and trust in congress.

Does this lack of a correlation between incumbent support and congressional trust mean that trust in congress is a pure measure of support at the regime level while trust in the president is a mere reflection of confidence in specific authorities, and thus less relevant to the viability of the political system? Not necessarily! To answer this question a more complete understanding of what underlies the difference in these relationships is essential.

Cognitive Dimensions of Incumbent Support

What explains the lack of a relationship between incumbent support and congressional trust and at the same time the strong correlation between confidence in the president and support for Carter? One explanation hinted at earlier is that the public uses different cognitive dimensions when evaluating the two types of incumbents. Davidson and Parker (1979) suggest that the public tends to evaluate congressmen on the basis of their service to

constituents and the district rather than on their policy positions. According to Fenno (1978), when members of congress visit their constituents they tend to employ presentation styles which emphasize their personal characteristics rather than their legislative record. Evaluations of presidential leaders, however, focus heavily on issues and the competence displayed while conducting the responsibilities of public office (Miller and Miller, 1976).

A second, closely related explanation for the differential impact of incumbent support on congressional and presidential trust arises from the degree of perceived separation between the incumbent and the institution. Low public awareness, organizational complexity and the multiple membership aspect of congress may allow each individual incumbent to separate their performance from that of the institution. Fenno (1978) presents numerous examples of congressmen who deliberately differentiate their actions from those of congress as a whole when addressing constituents. It is politically far more difficult, although not impossible, however, for the President to disclaim responsibility for the actions or inactions of the administration.

Taken together these two explanations suggest the following empirical expectations.

1. Different cognitive dimensions underlie support for presidential and congressional incumbents. Presidential support should primarily reflect consideration of policies and performance while attitudes towards house members should be based more heavily on response to personality attributes and constituency service.

2. Different cognitive dimensions are also used to evaluate incumbent congressmen and the performance of congress as an institution. The differences expected are comparable to those noted in 1.

3. Congress and the presidential incumbent are evaluated with respect to similar criteria which differ from those used to evaluate House incumbents.

4. Evaluations of congressional performance are related with confidence in congress more strongly than are ratings of incumbent performance.

5. Support or non-support of House incumbents which is based on assessments of performance and policies should be more strongly related with congressional trust than that which reflects judgments of personal style or district service.

Responses to open-ended questions seeking explanations for positive and negative assessments of congressional incumbents, as well as the job performance of Jimmy Carter and congress, provide evidence appropriate for testing these expectations. The responses were collapsed into six different substantive categories reflecting: domestic and foreign policy concerns; competence, which incorporates statements about the ability to make decisions, propose and implement programs, and effectively perform the duties of the office; personality or style characteristics including trustworthiness, honesty, ability to lead, and personal background characteristics; comments about the support or opposition of social and economic groups or interests; responsiveness, which focused mainly on paying attention to the public and their needs when Carter or congress were the target of the comments, whereas statements about House incumbents referred primarily to helping people in the district; and finally a set of responses dealing with presidential and congressional relations.[6]

As expected, personality and district service concerns dominated comments people made about incumbent congressmen (see Table 3), although a

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Table 3 goes here

Table 3: Substantive Dimensions Underlying Evaluations of Carter, House Incumbents and Congress

Cognitive Dimension	Carter	House Incumbents	Congress
Policy/Issues	37%	7%	28%
Competence	43	26	35
Personality	6	30	3[a]
Groups	5	5	6
Responsiveness/District Service	3	22	17
President-Congress Relations	6	10	11
	100%	100%	100%
(number of comments)	(3524)	(1776)	(2318)

[a]These comments referred primarily to honesty and corruption not personality characteristics which describe individuals.

substantial proportion (26 percent) also focused on competence. By comparison concern with competence and policies (43 and 37 percent respectively) were foremost on the minds of citizens when assessing Carter. The distribution of comments about congress also reveals a very large percentage regarding policies and performance, but the 17 percent referring to responsiveness is similar to the proportion of comparable comments about House members. Apparently assessments of congressional and presidential incumbents are based on quite different cognitive criteria. Evaluations of congress and Carter, on the contrary, focused on similar criteria, thereby suggesting that certain aspects of support for the presidential incumbent may be very relevant to regime level support.

Evaluative Orientations Within Cognitive Dimensions

Indicators of support, however, go beyond cognitive dimensions to evaluative orientations. Theoretically, supporters of the incumbents would make positive comments when asked to evaluate Carter, House members or congress, whereas non-supporters would mention negative comments. The degree of support associated with each cognitive category, therefore, is indicated by the preponderance of positive or negative comments incorporated by the dimension. Comments about Carter which focused on policies, competence and groups, for example, were far more negative than those reflecting concern with his personality, responsiveness to citizens or presidential and congressional relations (see Table 4). A good deal of citizen opposition to

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Table 4 goes here

Carter was clearly based on negative assessments of how he was handling domestic and foreign policy, and how he was relating to various groups in American society. In sharp contrast, evaluations of incumbents were almost

Table 4: Proportion of Negative Evaluations of Carter, House Incumbents and Congress by Substantive Dimensions

Cognitive Dimension	Carter	House Incumbents	Congress
Policy/Issues	55[a]	18	72
Competence	53	26	80
Personality	24	12	79
Groups	56	19	72
Responsiveness/District Service	25	7	87
President-Congress Relations	26	31	73

[a]Table entries are the proportion of the comments falling into the particular substantive dimension and directed at the specified target--Carter, House member or congress--which were negative.

uniformly positive across all substantive domains but particularly in reference to district services and personal style where only 7 and 12 percent of the comments, respectively, were negative.

Evaluations of congress were almost as uniformly negative as those for its members were positive. Particularly noteworthy is the difference with respect to responsiveness. While members were enjoying a great deal of positive support from public perceptions of their district services, congress as an institution was given overwhelmingly negative ratings for responsiveness (87 percent negative). Obviously, little of the positive support each House member generates through constituency contact and service extends to congress per se. Similarly, while concerns about the ability of the member to carry out the duties of the office and issues were associated with praise for each individual member, their collective product was evaluated in highly negative terms.

How strongly these various evaluative dimensions influenced political trust is suggested by the results of a multivariate analysis summarized in Table 5. The regression coefficients fit a pattern which helps to explain

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Table 5 goes here

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why support for the incumbent president is related to political trust while that for congressional incumbents is not. Both trust in the president and congress were most strongly affected by evaluations of incumbents which focused on policies and competence. Yet these dimensions incorporated only one-third of the judgements about House incumbents but more than three-quarters of those directed at Carter. The cognitive dimensions predominantly used to evaluate congressional incumbents simply did not translate into

Table 5: Regressions Predicting Political Trust From Different Substantive Dimensions of Incumbent and Institutional Support[a]

Cognitive Dimensions[b]	Carter	Incumbents	Congress
Policy/Issues	.18**	.10*	.14**
Competence	.27**	.13**	.18**
Personality[c]	.09*	.03	.08*
Groups	.06	.02	.09*
Responsiveness/ District Service[d]	.12**	.04	.14**
President-Congress Relations	.01	.02	.06*
Multiple R	.40	.16	.35

[a]The dependent variable for the Carter equation was trust in the president, for the other two equations it was trust in congress. Table entries are standardized regression coefficients.

[b]The independent variables were constructed by subtracting the number of negative comments from the positive comments for each substantive dimension.

[c]These responses for congress focused on honesty and corruption rather than personal leadership characteristics.

[d]Comments about House incumbents referred to district contact and services, those about Carter and congress dealt with institutional responsiveness and whether or not decisions reflected the interests of all citizens.

*$p < .01$ **$p < .001$

confidence in the institution of congress but appeared to reflect only on the member. Personal leadership characteristics, a major substantive dimension used to evaluate congressmen, was not at all related to trust in congress (beta=.03) and only weakly related to presidential trust in the Carter equation (beta=.09). As hypothesized earlier, attributes which are relatively unique to particular incumbents appear to have little impact on trust in political institutions.

Given the greater propensity to evaluate the incumbent president in terms of institutionally relevant substantive dimensions, support for the incumbent has more effect on trust in the institution than it does for congressional members. When citizens focused on congressional incumbent attributes which were directly relevant to the functioning of government, policy decisions and competence in performing the duties of the office, their evaluations were in fact significantly related with institutional trust (betas of .10 and .13 respectively). This conclusion is given additional support by the results of the equation dealing with evaluations of congress. Although assessments dealing with competence and issues had the largest impact on congressional trust (betas of .18 and .14 respectively), the other dimensions were also significant. Nearly all of the comments about congress, not unexpectedly, were focused at the institutional rather than the personal level and should,therefore, be more uniformly important predictors of trust.

One additional comparison which reflects the distinction between the institutional and personal focus of support for House incumbents and congress involves the dimension of responsiveness. Evaluations of both

presidential and congressional responsiveness were significantly related with trust in the institution (betas of .12 and .14 respectively). In contrast, comments about the responsiveness of House incumbents were not significantly associated with congressional trust. Statements regarding the responsiveness of House members referred primarily to the member staying in touch with constituents and performing services for them and the district, judgments which reflected on the member not the institution. This conclusion is supported by a separate analysis which revealed that contact with a representative, receiving aid from the member or the member's staff, and thinking that the member had helped the district were all strongly related to affective support for the incumbent but were not associated with ratings of congressional job performance or trust in congress.[7] Apparently the member's responsiveness to constituents was not seen as functioning in an institutional role associated with congress, but rather the action of a particular individual. As such it reflected positively on the member but did not translate into support for congress. Congress, on the contrary, was negatively evaluated in terms of responsiveness with respondents perceiving congressional decisions as self-serving and benefiting special interests rather than the public in general. This view of a discrepancy between congressional actions and the public interest--perceptions that fit with other research showing a drop in correspondence between roll call decisions and constituency attitudes (Stone, 1979)--significantly reduced trust in Congress.

In summary, support for the incumbents is a crucial element of theories explaining levels of political trust. Past research investigating the impact of incumbent support on political trust has been limited,

however, by focusing on purely affective measures of support. Such measures ignore the possibility that support and opposition may be based on a variety of interests. Opposition to incumbents which is a response to the unique attributes of particular leaders is less threatening to the political system than dissatisfaction which can be generalized across leaders or directed at institutional arrangements. The above analysis was aimed at overcoming this limitation by dividing incumbent support into substantive dimensions differentiating the personal, policy, performance, institutional and group bases of support.

Differences in the cognitive foundations of support were found for Carter and House incumbents. Evaluations of Carter focused on policy and performance characteristics whereas popular support of House incumbents was based on citizen reactions to their personal style and services to the constituents. Congress, the institution, was also evaluated in terms of its policy outputs and perceptions of congressional ineffectiveness in handling legislative programs. The substantive similarity between assessments of congress and Carter suggest that support or opposition directed at the presidential incumbent is based significantly on institutionally relevant criteria that reflect on the office. In contrast, support for House incumbents is a response to their personal actions and appeal. What is directly relevant for explaining levels of congressional trust, therefore, are evaluations of congressional performance rather than support of the incumbents. Similarly, to the extent that the presidential incumbent is evaluated in terms of criteria that reflect on the office, incumbent support is relevant to confidence in the institution itself.

Clearly, the relationship between incumbent support and political trust is more complex than previous research has suggested. The political meaning of this relationship and its implications for the regime depends on whether incumbent support is a reflection of policy and performance concerns or the personal attributes of specific leaders.

LONG-TERM POLICY DISSATISFACTION

Citizen dissatisfaction with the policies of specific incumbents may eventually become generalized into discontent with the government's performance in various policy areas. A growing number of studies have suggested that institutional distrust results when government is incapable of dealing with social problems as effectively as citizens expect (Aberbach and Walker, 1970; Miller, 1974; House and Mason, 1975; Miller, Goldenberg and Erbring, 1979; Marcus, 1979). If dissatisfaction with the government's policy performance persists over a period of time it may also lead eventually to questioning the validity of the current institutional arrangements for dealing with social problems.

During the sixties and early seventies political dissatisfaction was associated with the perceived inability of government to deal effectively with race relations, urban and campus unrest and the Vietnam war. Subsequently, economic concerns, which had begun to rise even before the 1974-75 recession, remained the most important problem facing the country in 1978.

Citizens expect government to deal with economic problems. In 1976, for example, 40 percent of the survey respondents definitely thought Carter would be able to reduce inflation, another 25 percent were less

certain, but only 36 percent felt he would not solve the problem. Yet, after two years of a Carter administration economic woes continued as the inflation rate increased and 36 percent of the survey respondents reported that they were worse off financially in 1978 than in the previous year.

However, economic distress which is targeted at the government (Fiorina, 1978, p. 43[illegible]; Miller and Glass, 1976), and which may accumulate over a series of administrations (Hibbs and Vasilatos, 1978) is theoretically more important for explaining political support than is short-term, personal economic dissatisfaction.[8] Assessments of how well the government was dealing with economic problems, for example, had become increasingly negative across the Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations. In 1972 only 19 percent of the survey respondents thought the government was doing a "poor" job of handling inflation, a figure that rose to 28 and 46 percent in the 1976 and 1978 surveys respectively.

Both evaluations of how well the government was handling economic problems, and the respondent's concern about their own present and future financial situation were significantly related with political trust in 1978 (see Table 6). Respondents who thought the government was doing a poor job in dealing with the economy were more distrusting of both the president and congress than those who were satisfied with the government's performance. Similarly, those who felt financially worse off were more distrusting than other respondents.

Given that these two sets of economic attitudes were intercorrelated ($r = .23$), a multivariate analysis was employed to estimate the

Table 6: Distrust of President and Congress by Economic Attitudes

Institution	Government Handling of Economy[a] Good (18%)	Fair (36%)	Poor (46%)	Personal Financial Situation[b] Better (34%)	Same (29%)	Worse (36%)
President	9[c]	22	40	22	28	35
	Pearson r = .35			Pearson r = .15		
Congress	23	34	56	33	42	52
	Pearson r = .31			Pearson r = .18		

[a]Questions on how good a job government is doing with inflation and unemployment combined.

[b]Questions asking how well off the family was relative to last year and how well off they will be in the coming year.

[c]Cell entries are the percent distrusting of the institution.

independent effects of each on political trust. The resulting regression coefficients presented in Table 7 for the total sample reveal a somewhat weaker impact of personal economic concerns after controlling for evaluations of government performance. These results

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Table 7 goes here

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support the hypothesis that dissatisfaction with government economic policy would be more strongly related with distrust than personal economic concerns.

Although the relationship between personal financial worries and distrust was weak, it was nevertheless significant and, therefore, noteworthy because it contradicts an earlier finding reported by Kiewiet and Kinder (1978). They had suggested that political distrust was not related with personal economic concerns but only with generalized, evaluations of how the government was handling the economy, thereby implying that

Table 7: Predicting Institutional Trust From Economic Attitudes for the Total Sample and for Those Who Blamed the President or Congress for Economic Problems[a]

TOTAL SAMPLE	Trust President	Trust Congress
Predictors		
Government Handling Economy	.33**	.30**
Personal Economic Concerns	.08**	.10**
Multiple R	.35	.33
BLAME PRESIDENT (N = 130)		
Government Handling Economy	40**	.11
Personal Economic Concerns	11*	.03
Multiple R	.40	.11
BLAME BOTH (N = 1344)		
Government Handling Economy	.35**	.29**
Personal Economic Concerns	.09**	.11**
Multiple R	.38	.34
BLAME CONGRESS (N = 525)		
Government Handling Economy	.28**	.32**
Personal Economic Concerns	.06	.13**
Multiple R	.30	.36

[a]Table entries are standardized regression coefficients and multiple correlation coefficients.

*$p < .01$ **$p < .001$

distrust may simply be ritualistic negativism unrelated to real social and economic conditions. The analysis presented here clearly contradicts their conclusion, suggesting instead that institutional distrust is at least partly rooted in personal assessments of economic circumstances.

The translation of personal and political economic evaluations into institutional distrust is also affected by attributions of responsibility for the situation. Fiorina (1978), and Miller and Glass (1976) have suggested that economic factors will have a political impact only if the government is blamed for economic conditions. The questions available for testing this hypothesis in 1978 are not ideal because they ask "which has the most say about the handling of inflation (unemployment)--the congress, the president, or is there not much difference," rather than asking which is to blame for economic problems. Nevertheless, using the items to divide the respondents into groups designated by the particular institution they saw as responsible for dealing with economic problems has the predicted consequences on the relationship between economic attitudes and trust.

The regression coefficients from Table 7 reveal the strongest effect of economic dissatisfaction on distrust among those who hold the specific institution responsible for inflation and unemployment. The result of controlling for the institutional target of economic blame was most apparent in the analysis of congressional trust. Among the 26 percent of respondents who held congress alone responsible for both inflation and unemployment, personal and political economic dissatisfaction was significantly associated with congressional distrust. By comparison, neither type of

economic evaluation was significantly related with distrust of congress among the 7 percent who blamed only the president for economic problems. A similar pattern, although not so sharply differentiated, can also be observed for presidential trust. Clearly, the attribution of blame for economic conditions is an important factor determining whether or not economic dissatisfaction will be translated into institutional distrust.

Apparently institutional distrust partly results from dissatisfaction with government performance in dealing with economic problems. This discontent with the government's performance is associated with personal concerns about economic conditions but represents more than just short-term financial distress. While available survey measures tapping evaluations of economic performance fail to specify a time frame, the analysis suggests that they capture accumulating discontent which is targeted at the president and congress because they are held responsible for solving economic problems. Thus far they have not succeeded, thereby undermining institutional confidence.

INSTITUTIONAL NEGATIVISM

Fenno (1977, 1978) has recently offered an explanation of congressional distrust which holds incumbent House members responsible for low public esteem of the institution. Fenno is not so concerned about the policy performance of congress and its members, although that is important. Rather, he focuses on the image of congress conveyed by congressmen when they address their constituents. In part he states.

> I had assumed that home styles would be highly individualized. And I should not have been surprised, therefore when I heard every one of my seventeen members introduced at home as "the best congressman in the United States." But I was not prepared to find each of them polishing this individual

> reputation at the expense of the institutional reputation of the Congress. Congress is not "we"; it is "they." And members of Congress run for Congress by running against Congress. Thus, individual explanations carry with them a heavy dosage of critical commentary on Congress (1977, p. 914).

Presumably this criticism of congress contributes to public distrust of the institution.

The 1978 national survey contained no questions asking respondents if they were aware of members criticizing congress. Thus, there is no direct way to determine how much influence perceptions of institutional criticism had on trust in congress. Nevertheless, an indirect test of the hypothesis is possible using media content data gathered as part of the 1978 study. During the five weeks preceding the 1978 election all newspaper articles about the congressional candidates and the election campaign in the 108 sample districts were clipped from two daily newspapers per district. The resulting set of nearly 3200 articles were then coded to indicate: the person or organization about whom comments were made in the article (the object of the news); the source of statements made regarding the object of the news; and the tone (positive, neutral or negative) of the statements addressed at the object of the news. Up to three "objects" per article were coded, thus producing a data set of 7093 newspaper content items which can be used to determine the impact of institutional criticism on trust in congress.

Given that the survey and newspaper content data can be merged by matching content and respondents on the basis of congressional district and specific newspaper read, the newspaper articles provide a means of empirically testing Fenno's hypothesis. Indeed, the content data should provide a very accurate indication of the extent to which members criticize

congress because it is free of the perceptual biases inherent to survey data. Moreover, many more people learn about their Representative through the media than through personal contact. In 1978, for example, 52 percent of the respondents said they had read about their Congressman in the newspaper, but only 14 percent had met them in person and 12 percent had ever attended a meeting at which they spoke. Thus, the likelihood of learning that the member said something critical about Congress is far greater from following the media than by personal contact.

The content data reveal that congress was the object of news rather infrequently relative to the incumbent and challenging candidate--8, 38 and 21 percent respectively. However, congress was mentioned far more frequently in statements attributed to the incumbent, 22 percent. In fact, a larger proportion of the incumbent's statements were directed at congress than at their election challenger (15 percent), but Carter and other individuals or agencies of government were even more widely discussed by members (33 percent) than was congress.

Contrary to Fenno's suggestion, when incumbents talked about congress their comments were not entirely negative, 37 percent of their statements were critical but 24 percent were positive and 39 percent were neutral. Furthermore, as the means in table 8 indicate, the challenger and a variety of other political figures were more critical of congress than was the incumbent member. Only the newspaper itself was, on the average, more neutral when

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Table 8 goes here

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discussing congress. Also, congressmen were significantly more critical of other government agencies than they were of congress.

Table 8: Mean Level of Criticism in Newspaper Articles by Object and Source of the News

	SOURCE			
OBJECT	Incumbent Congressman	Challenger	Various Political Figures	Newspaper
Incumbent	1.16[a] (51)	2.94 (233)	1.63 (216)	1.90 (1741)
Challenger	2.89 (98)	1.77 (56)	1.45 (161)	1.99 (977)
Congress	2.12 (144)	2.38 (68)	2.34 (47)	2.08 (250)
Government	2.47 (123)	2.74 (69)	2.44 (45)	2.13 (99)
Carter	2.12 (92)	2.45 (33)	*	*

[a]Cell entries are mean value for the tone of the comments attributed to the source and directed at the specific object. Tone was scored: 1 = positive, 2 = neutral, 3 = negative. The numbers in parentheses give the number of coded newspaper comments on which the means are based. Note that several other sources and objects coded were not presented in the table, thus the total number of newspaper references used is only 4503.

*Too few cases for reliable estimate.

Of course, congressmen were never critical of themselves, 85 percent of their self-directed statements were positive and the remainder were neutral, thus their comments on congress would always appear relatively more critical.

Although all members were not overwhelmingly negative in their public appraisal of congress, the important question here is whether or not the criticism which appeared in the media affected institutional trust. The answer, suggested by the correlations of Table 9, is perhaps, but definitely not directly. The tone (positive to negative) of public

Table 9: Correlations of Media Content Tone with Evaluations of Incumbent and Congressional Performance, and Trust in Congress[a]

Newspaper Content Variables	Evaluations of House Incumbent Performance	Evaluations of Congressional Performance	Trust in Congress
Incumbent as Object	.23**	.10*	.01
Incumbent as Source	.12*	.16**	.02
Congress as Object	.07	.29**	.05
Mean for All Political Objects	.06	.15**	.10*

[a]Correlations based only on newspaper readers, N = 1684.

*p < .01 **p < .001

statements which incumbents made about congress was significantly related with evaluations of incumbent and congressional performance but not trust (Pearson r = .12, 16 and .02 respectively). Moreover, the tone of newspaper content about congress. regardless of the source, was more strongly correlated with congressional performance (r = .29 and .05 respectively)

than were those comments attributable to the member. The only newspaper content measure which was significantly, albeit weakly, related with congressional trust was the degree of criticism averaged across comments directed at all political objects not just congress. Generally, criticism or praise in newspaper articles which was directed at members affected public ratings of their performance. Attitudes toward congressional performance were similarly correlated with criticism directed at congress, but trust was largely unaffected by anti-institutional news.

The newspaper analysis suggests that qualifications of Fenno's findings are in order. Public statements that incumbents made about congress, and which appeared in the newspaper thus potentially reaching a significant proportion of constituents, were not predominantly negative. The criticism conveyed by these comments was only weakly correlated with dissatisfaction over congressional performance and not at all associated with congressional distrust. Apparently, it is unnecessary to single out criticism of congress originating with House incumbents as an explanation of congressional distrust. However, statements in the news about Carter, congress and government more generally, originating from sources other than the newspaper itself, tend to be predominantly negative and, therefore, may have at least an indirect effect on institutional distrust.

COMPARING ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

Thus far several alternative theories explaining institutional distrust have been discussed. The relative importance of these different explanations can now be briefly examined in a multivariate analysis to determine

if each contributes independently to an overall understanding of political cynicism.

The results of the multivariate regression analysis incorporating measures for each of the hypothesized explanations are presented in Table 10. It should be noted that the regression equations do not reflect the impact of various complex conditioning factors such as the cognitive dimensions of incumbent performance discussed earlier. While this exclusion simplifies the presentation, it results in slightly underestimating the relative impact of incumbent and congressional performance on trust.

Table 10 goes here

The insignificant regression coefficients for party identification (see Table 10) demonstrate that current levels of political distrust do not reflect partisan politics. Democrats and Republicans alike are equally discontented with government. The direct correlation between party identification and trust which is often observed apparently results from the coincidental association between partisan orientation and other factors that more directly bear on institutional trust. The lack of a direct effect for party loyalty implies that the normal channels of partisan competition and electoral sanctions may not be a sufficient means of restoring confidence in government.

As expected from the earlier discussion, public criticism of congress, contact with one's congressman and perception of the member as a district ombudsman were not directly related with institutional trust. Anti-institutional news was, however, significantly related with public evaluations of both member and congressional performance (analysis results not presented

Table 10: Multivariate Analysis Predicting Institutional Trust[a]

Predictors	Trust in President		Trust in Congress	
Party Identification	.03	.04	.02	.01
Incumbent Affect[b]	.26**	.28**	.02	.02
Incumbent Performance[b]	.17**	.18**	.04	.07
Congressional Performance	--	--	.19**	.35**
Government Handling Economy	.11**	.19**	.12**	.17**
Personal Economic Concern	.02	.06*	.06	.09
Trust in Authorities	.38**	--	.51*	--
Media Criticism	--	--	.04	.08
Constituency Contact	--	--	.02	.03
Constituency Service	--	--	.02	.02
Multiple R	.64	.55	.65	.49

[a]Table entries are standardized regression coefficients and multiple correlation coefficient.

[b]These measures focused on Carter when predicting presidential trust and on the House incumbent when predicting trust in congress.

*$p < .01$ **$p < .001$

here), thus indirectly increasing distrust--a finding which corresponds to earlier research reported by Miller, Goldenberg and Erbring (1979). Likewise, district contact and service affected satisfaction with the House member which in turn was moderately related with assessments of congressional performance. Thus, several factors which had no direct influence on trust in congress may have had some small indirect impact. Clearly, if popular evaluations of House members had been more strongly connected with attitudes toward the institution, trust in congress would have been substantially higher.

The significant coefficients in the equations predicting presidential and congressional trust point to dissatisfaction with the performance of the incumbents, authorities, and government in general, as the major explanation for distrust. Comparing the equations for trust in the president and congress emphasizes the earlier analysis showing that public evaluations of the incumbent had little impact on confidence in congress. Trust in the president, however, was strongly influenced by both the popularity (beta = .26) and performance (beta = .17) of the current incumbent. Assessments of how well congress was performing its legislative duties appears to affect congressional trust to the same extent that incumbent performance influences presidential trust. Public attitudes towards the government's performance in solving economic problems were also significantly, albeit weakly, related with trust after taking the other explanations into account. Personal financial concerns, however, did not have a remaining effect on trust in the initial multivariate analysis.

Distrust of authorities is the single most important explanation of low public confidence in the president and congress (betas of .38 and .51 respectively). Thereby suggesting that accumulating dissatisfaction with the policies and actions of several leaders may have resulted in public discontent directed at the institutions of the political regime. The interpretation of this measure as capturing accumulated dissatisfaction with authorities is given additional support by having included evaluations of the incumbents in the same analysis. Finding that distrust of authorities had an independent effect on institutional confidence after controlling for public support of specific incumbents implies, contrary to what Citrin (1974) and Muller (1977) argue, that it reflects accumulating discontent with a series of authorities and not necessarily those currently in office.[9]

The substantive meaning of the trust in authorities measure is further clarified by removing it from the analysis and noting how the coefficients for the remaining variables change. Excluding trust in authorities from the analysis of Table 10 increased the size of the coefficients for the economic and congressional performance measures, while those for the incumbent support indicators were virtually unchanged. Evidently, distrust of authorities acts as an intervening variable which translates negative evaluations of government performance into institutional distrust. As such it is far more important to considerations of diffuse support for the political system than if it simply represented support for the incumbents.

One additional point from the multivariate analysis which is worth noting, but is not apparent from Table 10, concerns the overlap of

presidential and congressional trust. Considerable previous research has suggested that the nature of legislative-executive relations may influence public esteem for the institutions (Davidson, et al., 1968; Parker 1977). Conflict between congress and president, as well as presidential unpopularity have been cited as possibly reducing congressional trust. Analysis of the 1978 data, however, provides little support for this hypothesis. Measures of affect toward Carter and evaluations of his performance were not significantly related with congressional trust when entered in the equations presented in Table 10. Similarly, evaluations of congressional performance did not add significantly to an explanation of presidential trust. Although distrust of the two institutions was intercorrelated, it was not because attitudes toward one branch of government influenced confidence in the other. Rather, it was because citizens were dissatisfied with the performance of both institutions. Neither institution had dealt with social problems in a manner that met peoples expectations of a responsive, equitable, effective and competent government.

CONCLUSION

Institutions are a more fundamental aspect of the political system than authorities. Therefore, it is important to understand the extent to which disenchantment with institutions represents the unpopularity of incumbents or a deeper discontent with the institutions per se. The research reported here does not provide a definitive answer to this important question. It suggests that discontent with the actions and

policies pursued by a series of leaders may accumulate and eventually undermine respect for the political regime. Yet, even this implication must remain tentative because it has not been demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt that the measures of presidential and congressional trust tap attitudes toward the regime rather than the authorities. Nevertheless, the analysis conclusively demonstrates that the current, widespread political distrust of governmnet is rooted in attitudes that are more generic than evaluations of the incumbents.

Furthermore, the analysis indicates the need to qualify the Eastonian notion that dissatisfaction generalizes from authorities to the regime. Clearly, the public feels that their Representative is responsive but Congress is not. As long as members are evaluated as ombudsmen and congress is judged on the basis of policy decisions, corruption among the members as a whole (not individually) and collective responsiveness, attitudes towards the incumbent will not influence confidence in the institution. To the contrary, members who fear possible electoral consequences of low public regard for congress may be quite critical of the institution. Although this criticism alone does not directly undermine respect for congress, it certainly doesn't help. On the other hand, members praising congress would probably not help either. Moreover, the election of new members to congress, if based mainly on candidate appeal and constituency service, would have little effect on restoring congressional trust. By comparison, electing popular, competent, responsive leaders to the White House, would go a long way toward rebuilding public confidence in the presidency.

What political meaning can be attributed to the widespread lack of confidence in American government? Current distrust of authorities and institutions does not necessarily mean that citizens want a change in the basic democratic form of government. On the contrary, their discontent means that government is perceived as functioning in a manner which deviates from their normative expectations of honesty, competence, efficiency, equity and responsiveness. These are difficult goals to attain because several factors influencing success or failure lie outside the government's control. For example, the ability of leaders to demonstrate competence depends greatly on the solubility of problems. Similarly, the public's perception of equity and responsiveness in government is affected by the degree of political conflict and polarization in society. Nevertheless, the discontent should not be dismissed as an intractable social problem with little consequence. After all, distrust of government has steadily increased during the last decade and a half, thereby indicating that a substantial set of citizen grievances have gone unattended--a serious indictment of a representational democracy. Moreover, citizen dissatisfaction has accumulated and now appears to be directed at the institutions of government not just the authorities.

Yet, the skeptic might say, "Alienation. So What?" A complete answer goes well beyond this paper, but a brief summary of recent findings is instructive. In 1978 both distrust and dissatisfaction with presidential and congressional performance had a complex but significant impact on participation and the vote choice. For example, when congress was perceived as responsible for inflation and unemployment, congressional distrust depressed voter turnout (64 and 49 percent voted among the most and

least trusting respectively) while dissatisfaction with congressional performance actually stimulated participation (41 and 72 percent voted among the least and most dissatisfied respectively). Thereby suggesting that institutional distrust is associated with the feeling that elections don't make any difference while dissatisfaction is still more oriented toward replacing incumbent authorities. However, once the decision to participate had been made, congressional distrust, and even more strongly dissatisfaction with congressional performance, both significantly increased the proportion of votes for the challenger. Apparently, House incumbents have good reason to fear some electoral consequences of an unpopular congress.

Attitudes of political distrust have also been found to associate strongly with support for severe tax cutting legislation such as Proposition 13 in California (Sears, 1978). Questions from the 1978 survey which focus on attitudes toward federal tax cutting legislation mirror the California findings. Political cynicism was more strongly related with support for cutting federal taxes by one-third than was the level of family income or how well off financially the respondent was this year compared with last year. Among those respondents who were distrusting of government, 40 percent favored cutting federal taxes by one third even if it meant a reduction in military spending or services such as health and education. By comparison, only 17 percent of trusting individuals favored such a cut in taxes. The current mood supporting massive tax cuts is, therefore, not simply a reflection of economic hard times, nor is it necessarily a reflection of rekindled conservatism and a desire to abandon government programs. Rather, it is largely a citizen protest aimed

at incompetent, inefficient politicians and a government that is viewed as unresponsive to the needs of ordinary people.

Jimmy Carter came to office with the promise of restoring the citizen's confidence in government; to date, he has not done so. There are no easy techniques for solving this problem and a discussion of possible solutions goes well beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, the attitude of political distrust, which Carter used effectively to gain the White House in 1976, may yet return to haunt him in 1980.

A more fundamental concern, however, is the continuing trend that has run unabated for nearly two decades. At some point a call for change in the institutional structure of government may result from accumulated discontent with authorities. The current relationship between feelings of political cynicism and support for radical tax cutting proposals suggests a predisposition to accept massive changes in the structure of government which may in themselves prove more detrimental than the immediate state of affairs.

Footnotes

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[1]The post-election survey produced 2304 personal interviews with a representative, multi-stage probability sample of citizens 18 years old and older. The 1978 sampling frame differed from previous election studies in that 108 congressional districts were used as primary sampling units rather than counties and metropolitan areas. The data were collected under grant #SOC77-08885 from the National Science Foundation.

[2]Harris and Gallup poll data on the job performance of the president and congress are available for the same period of time. However, job performance and trust are conceptually quite different as the analysis below will demonstrate.

[3]The author is currently engaged in research aimed at sorting out the causal dynamics underlying this change as captured in the 1972-1976 panel survey. This work is not far enough along, however, to present any of the findings here.

[4]The trust in president and congress indices simply represent the number of distrusting responses to the two items. Distrusting responses were: trusting the president or congress "to do what is right only some of the time or never"; and saying that the administration or congress were "run by a few big interests looking out for themselves." The possible range of scores on the indices is from zero to two.

A similar measure of generalized distrust of authorities was also constructed by using the two comparable questions from the traditional trust series.

[5]The "feeling thermometer," a rating scale which ranges from zero degrees as most unfavorable to 100 degrees as most favorable with 50 degrees as neutral, was used to measure affective support for Jimmy Carter and the incumbent U.S. Representative from the respondent's own district.

Job performance evaluations were measured with the following survey question asked about Carter and the U.S. Representative: In general, how would you rate the job that President Carter/your U.S. Representative (specific name of incumbent) has been doing over the past two years--would you say that he has been doing a very good job, good, fair, poor, or a very poor job?

[6]Two of the open-ended questions asked respondents to explain the job rating (see footnote 5) they gave Jimmy Carter and congress. The comments about House incumbents came from questions asking the respondent what they

liked and disliked about the specific (actual names were used) congressional candidates from their district. Unfortunately the questions about House members differ from those about Carter and congress, thus weakening the evidence somewhat. Nevertheless, the codes for the different questions are very similar and collapsing them into the six general categories was conducted in a manner aimed at increasing the comparability of the responses. Perhaps future election studies will contain completely comparable questions which can be used to retest the hypotheses.

Readers interested in the specific recode rules used to collapse the open-ended responses should contact the author.

[7]Several structured items from the 1978 survey were used for this analysis. The actual variables employed are those numbered 186-189, 190-193, 227, 236, 237 in the National Election Study Codebook distributed by ICPSR. The analysis validates the results obtained with the open-ended responses by demonstrating that citizen reactions to contact and service reflect on the member personally rather than as a spokesperson for the institution.

[8]Hibbs and Vasilatos (1978) suggest that mass support for the incumbent president depends on a comparison of the economic performance of the current administration with that of the previous administration. The explanatory model entertained in this paper is similar but suggests that support for political institutions rather than incumbent authorities would be fit best with a moving average taken across several administrations. Unfortunately the available survey items on government economic performance are not ideally suited to this concept of accumulated discontent, thus, they are at best an indirect approximation.

[9]A separate analysis treating trust in authorities as the dependent variable reveals no significant effect for incumbent support, see regression equation 1 summarized below. This and other analysis suggests that there may be a reciprocal relationship between presidential trust and trust in authorities, thereby indirectly channeling incumbent support into generalized trust in authorities. Although further work with simultaneous equation models are necessary to confirm this, equation 2 below provides a preliminary estimate of this potential relationship.

Predictors	Equation 1	Equation 2
Party Identification	.04	.05
Carter Affect	.05	.06
Carter Performance	.03	.03
Member Performance	.02	.01
Congress Performance	.20**	.18**
Government Handling Economy	.21**	.15**
Personal Economic Concerns	.10*	.08*
Trust in President	--	.43**
Multiple R	.40	.52

*$p < .01$ **$p < .001$

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